

CLASSIFICATION
OF
MOUNTAIN WHITES

A PAPER BY

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Home Missions Committee of the Asheville Presbytery.

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Classification of Mountain Whites

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THERE has been some confusion in the use of the term "Mountain Whites of the South." Taken at its face value, it designates all the white people living in the mountain region of the Southern States. Anyone familiar with recent religious and educational literature in which the term is used need not be told that this is the sense in which it is generally employed in publications of this class. The Rev. Dr. A. P. Happer speaks of them in his pamphlet as "the people inhabiting the mountains of the South * * * the southwestern part of the Appalachian Mountain System. It extends from Virginia to Alabama, is about five hundred miles in length, and two hundred and fifty miles in width; includes one hundred and ninety-four counties; and has a population, according to the last census (1890), of 2,657,497".

In a recent circular issued by the American Sunday School Union the area and population are put slightly beyond Dr. Happer's figures: "We call attention to the needs of *the mountain whites*. * * This region has been called Appalachian America. It contains two hundred very large counties, with an area as large as the German Empire and a population of three millions."

I might multiply such quotations indefinitely from pamphlets, tracts and circulars, illustrating the scope of the term as used in the Home Mission literature of the churches, especially at the North.

But because there is something about the name, or its associations, that savors of condescension, there has been a natural disposition on the part of many of the intelligent inhabitants of the Southern Appalachians to limit its application to those who dwell in remote highlands and coves, where schools and churches are few and far between.

Speaking for myself, I am perfectly willing to be classed as one of the "Mountain Whites of the South", if this term is to be used at all; and this for at least two reasons.

First, many a mountain man who does not know his letters is as high-spirited as the mountain man who reads Latin and Greek, and is just as quick to resent the air of condescension. The minister of the gospel or the teacher who expects to reach and influence him must ever bear in mind that deep in the heart of the plainest mountaineer is fixed the conviction that "A man's a man for a' that". I must not attempt to fasten on him a name that is offensive to me.

Second, because, broadly speaking, the white inhabitants of the Southern Appalachians all have the same racial origin. This has been questioned and denied, but I have been at some pains to get at the truth, and I am convinced that the less intelligent people of the sparsely settled highlands are not racially distinct from the more intelligent inhabitants of the towns and richer valleys. The main stock is Scotch-Irish, upon which have been grafted shoots of English, Dutch and German origin, with here and there a Huguenot. For several years I have been collecting, through ministers and teachers in various parts of this region, the predominating family names. From one of the most mountainous counties of North Carolina I received a list consisting of twenty names of large family connections. Of these twenty names, sixteen have the prefix *Mc*, and the other four are names common in Scotland and England. These *Mc's* are not now Presbyterians, though doubtless their ancestors were. Such facts dispose of the objection that has been raised, that if these people were of Scotch origin they would still be Presbyterians. The list sent from this particular county is more distinctly Scotch than most of them, but all the lists show a predominance of names denoting Scotch descent.

On a recent visit to a community far from the railroad and provided with very meagre religious and educational opportunities, I was told by the man with whom I staid that his great-grandfather came from the North of Ireland and was a Presbyterian, though his descendants are Methodists. He said he thought the same was true of most of his neighbors. Their names and physiognomy indicate that he is right. The proportion of Scotch patronymics varies in different communities, but there is little doubt that they predominate in the country as a whole.

A few weeks ago in a mission school, made up of children from very illiterate families, my attention was attracted by hearing the teacher call one of the girls Caledonia. I am informed that this is a favorite name in this region.

It is a well-known fact that here and there through the mountains, the name "Presbyterian bread" is applied to cold bread, often by people who never use the word Presbyterian in any other connection and who know nothing of its meaning. But the more intelligent inhabitants of the valleys, among whom Presbyterianism survives as a distinctive form of the Christian faith, say that this cold bread was so called because of the old-fashioned Presbyterian custom of abstaining as far as possible from cooking and other household work on Sunday.

The conclusion indicated by these facts is corroborated by the testimony of many others who have investigated the origin of the mountaineers.

Dr. Happer says: "I engaged in an extensive correspondence with persons who had mingled with these people, had had intercourse with them, had seen their physical, mental and moral characteristics, and had heard them tell of their own origin and traditions, and had thus

been able to form some reliable judgment in regard to the matter. The replies given to my letters furnish testimonies and proofs which establish it beyond all reasonable doubt that the inhabitants of this mountain region are very largely of Scotch-Irish descent."

Among this people, as among all others, there are gradations from higher to lower, and the failure to recognize this has given rise to much foolish writing, and therefore to much misunderstanding, in regard to the inhabitants of the Southern Appalachians.

Roughly speaking, the people may be classified into three grades. First:—There are those whose ancestors settled in the broad, rich valleys, or on extensive plateaus, where we now find prosperous towns begirt with fertile farms—such towns as Staunton, Lexington, Roanoke, Salem and Abingdon in Virginia; Morganton, Asheville, Waynesville and Hendersonville in North Carolina; Bristol, Knoxville and Chattanooga in Tennessee. The inhabitants of these towns and of the regions round about will compare favorably with any population on the globe.

Second:—Radiating from these valleys and plateaus are ranges of mountains, growing more and more rugged and inaccessible, among which may be found two other grades of our mountain people. The higher grade consists of those who have preserved the general characteristics that mark the Scotch-Irish wherever they are found. They are hardy, hospitable, honest and intelligent, but they are too far from the highways of civilization to have kept pace with their more fortunate kinsmen in education and the conveniences of modern life. In native force, however, they are in no way inferior, but rather superior, to many more highly favored representatives of the same race.

Their very isolation has saved them from many of the subtle evils that are poisoning the streams of a higher civilization. It has also developed in them an independence of the outside world that is unique. Their working attire is largely homespun, supplemented by an occasional suit of store clothes for wear on Sunday and on special occasions. Their well-laden tables owe almost everything except coffee and sugar to the products of their gardens and farms. Even the molasses is home-made, every community being supplied with one or more sorghum mills. Their hospitality is unbounded. Their likes and dislikes are strong and unyielding. When deeply stirred they are ready to kill an enemy or to die for a friend. Their love of liberty is proverbial.

"Thou wears't upon thy forehead clear
The freedom of a mountaineer".

To courtesy they respond courteously, but they do not spend much time in hunting for polite words with which to meet what they consider an infringement of their rights. The late General Doubleday, a retired officer of the United States Army, who resided for several years in Asheville, used to tell with great enjoyment of a slight encounter he had with a fine type of the rugged mountaineer. He

was driving rapidly along a country road, when suddenly he was forced to draw rein in order to avoid collision with a wagon whose owner was taking his time in turning his team. The General spoke rather impatiently, hoping to expedite matters, but the countryman showed more vigor in his reply than in his efforts to clear the track. The General, half-nettled and half-amused, drew himself up in military fashion and said, "Perhaps you do not know who I am, sir; I am General Doubleday." The mountaineer halted his team, and drawing himself up, in turn, replied, "I don' keer who the devil you are. You kin either wait till I turn my waggin' roun', or you kin jist go back t'other way."

A Master of Arts of one of our leading Southern universities and a man of affairs, who has lived for years in close contact with these people, writes me, "They need only an introduction to civilization to prove themselves equal to any men in the world. I have always heard there were no truer soldiers in our armies during the Civil War than these same people. They had not the training and civilization needed to give them due respect for discipline, and would slip away home if they felt like it. This of course was desertion. But they would come back when they got ready, with conscience void of offense, and show themselves as brave and uncomplaining, enduring, unconsciously heroic, as any men in the army. This always struck me as very wonderful, seeing how little they really had at stake, and what a gulf there was socially between them and the upper class in the South. So I regard these people as the finest rough material in the world, and consider one of them modelled into available shape worth a dozen ordinary people to the world."

They had the same reputation as fighters on both sides in the Civil War. President W. G. Frost of Berea College relates how a mountain guide, who belonged to the Army of the Cumberland, described the terrible day when the mountain men first met in battle: "Tell you what, them men was fighters. They'd been used to lickin' everything they met, and when they struck the Army of the Cumberland they didn't know what had happened. No more did we. They fixed bayonets and came chargin' up the hill. We fired in their faces, but still they kep' a comin'. Our big guns mowed down whole rows of 'em, but they kep' a comin'. Men that was shot in their feet got on their hands and knees and kep' a comin', and we couldn't get shet of 'em till we killed 'em dead."

What else should we expect of descendants of the brave pioneers who interposed themselves as a buffer between the savage Indians and the early colonists, and whose dauntless courage gave to the American cause the victory at King's Mountain and at New Orleans?

Just after the close of the Spanish-American war, Mrs. Darwin R. James of New York, President of the Woman's Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church (North,) which is doing so much for Christian education in these Southern highlands, wrote me, "I

met in Paris last winter a gentleman who told me that he was informed by one of our superior officers, that the best soldiers in our recent war with Spain came from the mountain regions of North Carolina !” This does not sound as if the natural force of this hardy stock had abated.

These people are aware of their lack of educational advantages and are eager for better things along this line, *provided they are approached in a way that will not compromise their self-respect or wound their honest pride.* They will not accept help, even in that which they value so highly, from those who look down on them or attempt to patronize them. This high spirit, though often misdirected and sometimes unreasonable in its prejudices, is really one of their best characteristics, as it is of the Scotch-Irish everywhere.

Like their ancestors they are cautious in committing themselves on any subject, even the most trivial, and are suspicious of a stranger until the new-comer has proved himself worthy of confidence. Their silence will be mistaken for stupidity only by those who love to hear themselves talk, or who lack shrewdness in judging character, in which art the mountaineer is past-master.

As illustrating their desire for education, a minister of the gospel told me recently of a conversation he overheard at a mountain inn. He was on a fishing trip, and his incognito was safe in the absence of all clerical ear-marks. The inevitable commercial traveller was engaging the proprietor in conversation about the country and the people. The worthy host remarked that within ten years a certain well-known Christian denomination, to which he himself did not belong, would predominate in that country, though at present far behind several others in membership. When asked upon what he based his judgment, he replied, “ Because this denomination (naming it) always establishes a school alongside of the church, and sends educated teachers and preachers, from whom our people can learn something. That is what we mountain people have long needed, and we are glad that a better day is dawning for us. You mark my words and watch the fulfilment of my prophecy ! ”

My honest conviction is that no people in the world offer so promising a field to the philanthropist who desires to make the best possible investment in Christian education. The first educational need of the country is good primary schools, followed by a multiplication, at central points, of institutions of higher grade, as the demand for them is increased by well-taught primary schools. The institutions of secondary grade already established are now overcrowded, and often have to do the work that ought to have been done in the grade below. The best teaching at present is found in the church schools, and this for several reasons. In the first place, these schools are usually taught by those who have consecrated their lives to Christian education without regard to the salary offered, though as a matter of fact they are generally better paid than the teachers in the public schools. And in the

second place, the choice of teachers in the church schools is not hampered by local influences or political "pulls". Third, the Bible is a non-sectarian text-book in these schools; and fourth, the church school runs for nine or ten months, as against four or five months of the public school.

There should be industrial training, as far as possible, in all grades. The girls should be taught the art of housekeeping and the boys the use of tools. Our Committee of Home Missions is seeking to establish good primary schools wherever there is an opening for them. We have more appeals for such work than the means at our disposal will enable us to meet.

It remains to speak of a third and lower grade found in the Appalachian Mountains. The people of this class are shiftless, ignorant, and apparently without aspirations. Even their vices are less vigorous than those of the higher grades. A large proportion of this class own no land, but rent on shares and scratch a living out of the soil around their cabins, which is eked out by what they catch in fishing or kill in hunting. (It is not meant that all renters on shares are of this class.) They haunt the fringes of the better communities in narrow coves, or far up on the mountain sides, though in some instances they are not so isolated, but are gathered in "settlements", which are homogeneously bad. The mountains as well as the cities have their slums. Many of those who have written about "the mountain whites" have made the mistake of describing this class as representative of the general condition in the Southern Appalachians. They picture one of these ignorant, degraded, ambitionless human beings, and then assert or imply that there are between two and three millions of them in the Southern highlands. It would be just as fair for one to describe the typical dweller in the slums of New York, and then declare with a wave of the hand that there are "several millions of him" in that great city. It is this kind of writing that has so often stirred the anger and resentment of the Southern mountaineers. My opinion is that two hundred thousand, or from one-fifteenth to one-tenth of the entire population, would be an over-estimate of this class. The most civilized communities in the world have their "submerged tenth."

But what is the origin of these people? Various correspondents declare on general principles, but without proof, that few, if any, of them are Scotch-Irish, but that they are the descendants of bound white servants and criminals transported from Great Britain, and the propagation of the scum that floated across from Germany and other continental countries to the new world.

An able and distinguished professor in a Scotch-Irish university writes concerning one of these settlements, which is within reach of that centre of Christian influence and culture: "The—mountain people have been to some degree elevated by contact with the people from—, and by school and Christian work amongst them. On a somewhat recent visit to the Sunday school, I was interested in

hearing the roll of names called. There were about one hundred and thirty of them. What struck me was the absence to so large a degree of names that I could recognize as distinctively and certainly Scotch. Not twenty-five per cent were such. German names were more frequent. I am disposed to think that the mountain whites are the driftwood from the tides of population flowing along the bases and over the Appalachian Mountains. They are the deposit of the less thrifty, energetic, and intelligent." It will be noticed that this correspondent limits the term "mountain whites" to the third and lowest of the classes treated of in this article.

His theory concerning their origin I believe to be the true one, and it could hardly be expressed more vividly than in the figure he employs. I am personally acquainted with the condition of the community he describes, and it is a typical settlement of the illiterate, shiftless and indifferent class. And yet he recognized something like one-fourth of the names as distinctively and certainly Scotch. So far as investigation has been made, the names of these people indicate English, German, Dutch or Scotch descent. In other words, this class is made up of the degenerates of the same races that constitute the higher grades, the Scotch-Irish being in smaller proportion, because descended from an ancestry noted from the days of John Knox for their thrift, intelligence and forcefulness, and because the best of this race emigrated to America, whilst some of the worst elements of the other races were transported for crime. "Evil communications corrupt good manners", and even so hardy and virtuous a race as the Scotch-Irish may be expected to deteriorate in some degree through association with the degenerates of other strains.

There is encouragement in the testimony of the distinguished professor already quoted, that the people of the community he writes of have been to some degree elevated by contact with the intelligent Christian people who have stretched out to them a helping hand. This indicates the line of effort along which they are to be reached. Schools and churches must become centres from which will radiate the light of knowledge and of life eternal.

It ought to be said in closing that there are no hard and fast lines marking the classification made in this article. Each of the three classes has its gradations, and it is not always easy to indicate where one ends and another begins. Three types have been described as standards, to one or another of which the people of the Southern Appalachians conform to a greater or less degree.

In a pamphlet entitled "Mission Work among the Mountain Whites" this subject has been treated from a somewhat different point of view. This pamphlet will be sent, free of charge, to anyone who will take the trouble to apply for it, enclosing stamp for postage.

